

Helen Vendler had advocated in their respective articles; he also stands for a more rational scheduling which does not turn students into passive Literature-devourers, but, rather, a system which allows their minds to form themselves (precisely what Gregory Nagy claims in his article). At the same time, he strives to make it clear that these conditions should by no means involve a disconnection between University and the real world, thus echoing Judith Shklar's article on the need to teach Political Theory to allow students to be able to think in an intelligent and constructive way.

Heterogeneity, controversy and denseness are, then, the most outstanding features which we will encounter in this book. But, even if this is true, we can also see how the articles coincide in presenting exceedingly personal, non-patronising views and approaches of teachers and lecturers who have also enjoyed a remarkable experience in the field of research. Even though we might argue that their views must be necessarily biased by what they have gone through in their classrooms, it is no less true that this book should be acknowledged as nothing more (and nothing less) than a colleague's well-meant explanations of his or her own methods and their degree of success or failure. In this sense, any professional, no matter whether he or she is experienced or still young, will be able to find a reflection of some of his/her questions and difficulties and, hopefully, an answer to some of them by means of an active process of reading which will also have a remarkably strong component of self-introspection. After all, as T.S. Eliot once said, «It is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we from time to time change our way of being wrong».

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ITALO CALVINO. *Por qué Leer los Clásicos*. Translated by Aurora Bernárdez. Barcelona: Tusquets, 1992. 278 pages.

At first sight, it may seem strange to review the Spanish translation of an Italian book in an English Department journal. This book, however, deserves inclusion here, not only because of the comments on English authors it contains, but because its theme is interesting to those interested in literature in general. As the title makes clear, it focuses on literary classics, a concept that has played an important role in literary theory and teaching and that is now being questioned. The fact that the author is a well-known writer of fiction, and one that has thought a lot about literature and experimented with it in his work, gives a special interest to his point of view and ideas about the topic.

Por qué Leer los Clásicos consists of more than thirty short essays written mostly in the 70s and early 80s, although a few come from the 50s and 60s, first published in book form in 1991, after Calvino's death. This book puts together pieces on writers and books considered «classics», preceded by the title essay, an attempt to define what a classic is. It also includes an index and a list of the books commented that are available in Spanish.

Calvino does not offer one definition of a classic but fourteen. He explores the different aspects that determine our ascription of a work to this category. These definitions do not come from literary history, but from a direct relationship between reader and text: «*Tu clásico es aquel que no puede serte indiferente y que te sirve para definirte a ti mismo en relación y quizás en contraste con él*» (p.17). So classics are books —ancient and modern— not only read but re-read, that always offer something new to the reader and at the same time are related —one way or

another- to a cultural and literary tradition.

Since different books appeal to different people, there cannot be a universal canon, but each reader will make his or her own selection from different sources. This affects the role of school, the institution in charge of transmitting literary tradition. According to Calvino, literature teaching is a sort of introduction, providing elements and tools for each person to elaborate his or her ideal library of classics. The books in this library, however, will not be read as a duty but for pleasure, and sometimes will be discovered quite by chance.

Most of the book consists of essays about Calvino's ideal library, a series of books and writers that, because of the role they played throughout the author's life, are his classics, regardless of their place in literary history. The selection ranges from works that everybody recognizes as major classics (such as *Orlando Furioso*) to books that are not considered the most representative of famous writers (in the case of Dickens, Calvino comments about *Our Mutual Friend*) and to authors that are not so well known (like the Renaissance philosopher Gerolamo Cardano). It is a personal choice, eclectic, which does not attempt to prevail as a canon and only offers the experience of a given person and moment. Nevertheless, the works commented are arranged chronologically, as in a history of Western literature starting with the *Odyssey* and ending with the twentieth century.

Although Calvino is well known as a writer, the point of view in these essays is that of a sensitive and intelligent reader, who enjoys reading and thinking what the artist has to say about human beings and their world. Perhaps the most personal example of this approach is the essay «Eugenio Montale, "Forse un mattino andando"», on a single poem. It starts with a reflection on Calvino learning poetry by heart, and on the changes his

memory has made on Montale's poem, which takes him into more general comments on the writer and the question of perception of reality.

Even when Calvino is not so personal, he is well aware of readers' position and needs. Many of the essays are introductions of the texts discussed for the benefit of new readers, in which Calvino takes the role of a more experienced reader giving hints on more interesting and enjoyable aspects. The effect is that the readers of the essays get involved in them and consider the works commented attractive (even if *a priori* they don't seem so) because they are presented as something one can interact with and enjoy thinking about. Instead of giving explicit reasons to read the classics, the author shows what they can offer us. Another technique that makes Calvino's classics more accessible to the non-experienced reader is to place them in a more familiar context.

So the *Anabasis* is related to the Second World War documentaries and memories, thus making the literary and ethical issues discussed more relevant to modern readers. In fact, Calvino hardly ever deals with a text in isolation; according to his view of the classics as a continuum, he always relates different works in order to comment on them better. For example, introducing Conrad in terms of «which authors should share a library shelf with him». In other cases, the context is provided by different readers: Calvino often refers to other writers and critics to make his point clear or, as in «Las Odiseas en la *Odisea*», to show different aspects of a work. None of these readings is *the* reading, though: as each reader chooses his or her classics, he or she decides on reading-relationships between books. The author is sharing his preferences, not imposing them.

In spite of the general tone of introduction, the essays are not homogeneous. There are differences in length, scope and

style, ranging from short introductory notes to more academic discussions. As this may be related to different origins, some more information on the essays' first contexts could have been useful to readers curious about their original aims, or interested in Calvino's career as a whole. Such information, however, is not necessary to enjoy the book.

In fact, after reading it some readers may feel like turning to one of the books discussed, or going back to the classics they have read with a new interest. Even though the interest of individual essays may vary depending on the reader's background and tastes, the general aims and the ideas expressed in the title essay are completely valid. Calvino reminds us that in the end the only reason for reading the classics is that it is better than not reading them (p. 20) and that books important to us are not read for obligation, but for pleasure. And this is something both students and teachers of literature should always remember.

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ITALO CALVINO, *Seis Propuestas Para el Próximo Milenio*. Madrid: Siruela, 1989. 138 pages.

Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* is a posthumous collection of lectures that should have been delivered at Harvard University, but could not because of the author's death. These six memos stand for the literary values that Calvino proposes to save and encourage in the future. If these requirements were fulfilled, the function of literature could be said to be entirely existential; in other words, it would establish a real and meaningful communication, discarding purely rhetorical works. Literature would bring

poetry, science, and philosophy together, encouraging an escape from the world of the individual self. We would interpret literature as a way to save language from the present day «disease», the world of visual technology that is making it lose its cognitive strength and quickness. Literature would be understood as a means to shape life.

The memos are on: lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity and consistency. They correspond to the different chapters in the book. Calvino puts forward Lightness as the way of looking at life that writers should aim at if they are to fight against the heaviness that we see in the present world. Here, Calvino insists on the fact that he is not proposing an escape from reality, but an approach to the world from a different point of reference, with other methods of knowledge based both on philosophy and science. Next, Quickness basically refers to both economy and precision in language. Quickness can also be read as the result of the balance between concentration and craftsmanship on the one hand, and mobility and ease on the other. In a similar way, the need for exactitude in the organization of literary works, the choice of language and images and their intelligent use so that their inherent referential power is preserved and exploited to the maximum. In the next memo, on Visibility, he enhances the creation of valid, new images. Multiplicity is concerned with the fact of looking at the novel as an encyclopedia that interweaves various kinds of knowledge and codes into a plural vision of the world.

Calvino puts forward an optimistic outlook on the future of literature, and his ambitious proposal could, in this sense, be easily mistaken for a romantic attempt, had the book not been written in such a rational and intelligent way. The names given to the memos already point at the bright side of life. Besides, the book itself is a good example of the values the